



1908 Old Sweethome Church and School, Mt. Ida, Ark.

Photo by Eddy Sisson

Abandoned Arkansas preserves history one shot at a time

From the depths of hidden ghost towns to the rooftops of elegant hotel atriums – a group known as "Abandoned Arkansas" explores structures that seem stuck in a forgotten time capsule as if in a scene from a movie. The Abandoned Arkansas team includes Michael Schwarz, Eddy Sisson and James Kirkendall. Other members include Grant King, Jared Holt, Lana Yates and 15 guest contributors.

The team's mission is to search the state for historic buildings that have suffered through neglect, natural disasters, vandalism or are vacated and locked. From structures built from the late 1800s to the late 1900s, the team has documented some of the most famous locations in Arkansas such as the Fort Chaffee Field Hospital, Dogpatch USA, The Majestic Hotel, Dinosaur World and the partially vacant Nyberg building of the Arkansas Tuberculosis Sanatorium.

The team not only documents the architecture of the buildings but also the items inside it, as they can trigger people's memories. Some may be just looking at the cool photographs. To others, however, these buildings have a personal connection. Viewing the website comments, you can see the deep impact: "I am very grateful to Abandoned Arkansas. Although the photos show the place run down, you can still see the beauty and grandness." "I used to go to school there. So many fond memories! This team does wonders for our state."

The Abandoned Arkansas website was founded by Schwarz, an aspiring filmmaker. His perspective on abandoned buildings changed when he took pictures of a school that burned down. He met a widow who had fond memories of the school because her husband had worked there. She was in tears seeing the school burn down but luckily Schwarz had photos from before the facility caught fire.

"People have a connection to these buildings and we document these places in case something were to happen to them" said Schwarz. He is also a storyteller for Abandoned Arkansas and plays an important role as a member of other historic organizations such as "Arkansas Ties" and "Abandoned Oklahoma."

Not only does the community have a connection to the buildings but so

do members of the team. Sisson, who is the social media manager for the official Dogpatch USA Facebook page, said "Abandoned Arkansas, for me, is much deeper than the documentation, it's also about getting hands-on in the restoration and clean up of historic places." Sisson, who has taken thousands of photos of Dogpatch and knows every building and pathway, has dedicated hours of labor to restore it to its former glory.

Kirkendall, a Fort Smith resident, also is a dedicated team member of Abandoned Arkansas. He originally joined the team as a guest photographer and his persistence in obtaining permission to buildings has led him to gain the title of the team's negotiator.

"It's about preserving history in a unique way. We go to places that the general public isn't allowed to view,"

Kirkendall said. In gaining permission to shoot, he helps the property owner understand the photographers' motive is to share a part of the history through the remains of the buildings.

Another objective for the team is to spread the word of these structures to real estate brokers, contractors, architects and government officials in hopes that plans for restorations can begin. Currently, the website abandonedarkansas.com has posted more 100 locations and receives traffic of about 10,000 views a week with more than 16,000 Facebook followers.



1898 hymnal, Sweethome Church